

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Digital Repository

Retrospective Theses and Dissertations

Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and
Dissertations

1977

Critics' views of the character of Jim in Huckleberry Finn

Elizabeth J. Gifford
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gifford, Elizabeth J., "Critics' views of the character of Jim in Huckleberry Finn " (1977). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 6965.
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/6965>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Critics' views of the character of Jim
in Huckleberry Finn

by

Elizabeth J. Gifford

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1977

One hundred years have passed since Samuel Clemens began creating his masterpiece, Huckleberry Finn. The main characters in this novel are a homeless rebel of a boy who is (or believes he is) running away from his murderous father, and a frightened slave who is running away from a greedy old woman owner who was about to sell him and separate him from his family. Much has been written about this work--ranging from the highest praise to scathing criticism.

Critics have expressed their views on every possible aspect of this work; they have pondered the overall theme (and lesser themes too numerous to mention), the symbolism, the superstition, the satirizing of the South, the beginning, the middle, the end, the language, the writing, the river, individual chapters, individual scenes, individual characters. I will consider one of these individual characters in this paper.

Samuel Clemens created for the world a variety of unforgettable characters--Hank Morgan, Pudd'nhead Wilson, Tom Sawyer, and Huckleberry Finn are just a few. And critics have analyzed and interpreted nearly every one of his characters, including the Mississippi River. Nigger Jim, one of

Twain's characters who has received a wide range of criticism, is my subject. In the ninety-two years of his existence critics have seen Jim in many lights. I intend to look closely at this criticism, but because of the great amount that has been written about Huckleberry Finn, it is necessary to limit the criticism that can be dealt with here. Comment will be limited to that criticism which deals directly with an interpretation of Jim's character. This interpretation may be as brief as a phrase or as extensive as a complete essay. The discussion will not include criticism that mentions Jim's name in passing while discussing other aspects of the novel.

From the first review to the latest essay there has been a growing appreciation of Jim's character, his influence on Huck's development, and his importance to the novel. Some interpretations are in direct conflict. Chadwick Hansen, for example, sees Jim as emerging from being an insignificant Negro slave to becoming an abstraction of man.¹ James P. McIntyre, on the other hand, sees him develop from being an abstraction toward becoming an individual.² Some point out Jim's ignorant, superstitious gullibility and his stage-Negro

¹Chadwick Hansen, "The Character of Jim and the Ending of Huckleberry Finn," Massachusetts Review, 5 (Autumn, 1963), 51.

²James P. McIntyre, "Three Practical Jokes: A Key to Huck's Changing Attitude Toward Jim," Modern Fiction Studies, 14 (Spring, 1968), 34.

qualities while others point out his moments of dignity, selflessness, and wisdom. Obviously Jim is a complex and original creation deserving critical attention. Following is a chronological approach to the critical interpretation of the character of Jim in Huckleberry Finn.

Before its publication Huckleberry Finn had received more attention than any of Twain's other works. He had read parts of it during his public appearances, and two chapters, "The Grangerford-Shepherdson Feud" and "King Sollermun," were well-received when they appeared in the December (1884) and January (1885) issues of Century.³ This pre-publication attention and acclaim almost guaranteed the book's success, but it also meant there was less notice given the novel by the critics when it finally appeared in toto.

Huckleberry Finn was first published in England on December 4, 1884; Twain's own firm published it in the United States the following February.⁴ Newspapers paid no particular attention to it. According to A. L. Vogelback no review appeared in the leading newspapers of the day--the New York

³Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain: A Biography (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), II, 793.

⁴Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain at Work (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 86.

Tribune, the Boston Transcript, or the Chicago Tribune.⁵

Brander Matthews wrote the earliest review recorded which appeared in the Saturday Review (London), on January 31, 1885. Toward the end of a relatively long review, the first critic of Huckleberry Finn comes to the complex character of Jim.

Jim is an admirably drawn character. There have been not a few fine and firm portraits of negroes in recent American fiction, of which Mr. Cable's Bras-Coupé in the Grandissimes is perhaps the most vigorous, and Mr. Harris's Mingo and Uncle Remus and Blue Dave are the most gentle. Jim is worthy to rank with these; and the essential simplicity and kindness and generosity of the Southern negro have never been better shown than here by Mark Twain. Nor are Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and Jim the only fresh and original figures in Mr. Clemens' new book; on the contrary, there is scarcely a character of the many introduced who does not impress the reader at once as true to life--and therefore as new.⁶

Matthews recognizes Jim as an individual worthy of attention along with other Negro characters in literature. This is a stereotyped conception of the race that is not surprising if one pauses to consider the Negro's social position and the

⁵A. L. Vogelback, "The Publication and Reception of Huckleberry Finn in America," American Literature, 11 (Nov. 1939), 266.

⁶Brander Matthews, "Huckleberry Finn: A Review," in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Annotated Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 278-79. This edition of Huckleberry Finn is a convenient source for citations of criticism. Hereafter this book will be cited as Norton, Huckleberry Finn.

pictures of him promoted in the theater and in literature up to this time.

Two other reviews appeared shortly after the book's publication. Robert Bridges wrote a review for Life for February 26, 1885, but his review was a sarcastic attack on the book's humor and made no mention of Jim.⁷ The third review which comprises the available immediate response to the book was written by T. S. Perry and was published in May of 1885. Perry mentions Jim only in connection with Huck and the plot; he makes no evaluation of Jim's character.⁸

Huckleberry Finn was not the subject of literary critics again until 1891 when the Scottish historian, poet, and man of letters, Andrew Lang, published an essay in 1891. Jim makes a poor showing, one must assume, according to Mr. Lang. Sometimes it is important what a critic does not say or how very little he says. He reports that he had read the novel twice--once years ago and "again last night." After two readings, he writes:

The casual characters met on the way are masterly: the woman who detects Huck in girl's dress; the fighting families of Shepherdson and Grangerford; the homicidal

⁷Robert Bridges, "Review of Huckleberry Finn," Life, 26 Feb. 1885, p. 19.

⁸Thomas Sergeant Perry, "Mark Twain," Century Magazine, May 1885, pp. 171-72.

Colonel Sherburn, who cruelly shoots old Boggs, and superbly quells the mob of would-be lynchers; the various old aunts and uncles; the negro Jim; the two wandering imposters; the hateful father of Huck himself.⁹

This quotation shows where in the scheme of things this critic places a character who is present through most of the book and unquestionably influences the development of its main character.

Two final articles should be included with the earliest criticism of Huckleberry Finn and Jim. In 1896 an unsigned article appeared in Punch. In it Jim is given only one line, but it reads: "for simple, unforced pathos you have the runaway nigger, Jim, one of the finest and purest gentlemen in all literature."¹⁰ By contrast in an article a year later Charles Thompson writes that "Huck gains in apparent stature by being kept clear of taller rivals in the centre of the stage;...the childlike negro whom he befriends, and who, by contrast, makes him seem so much more the man."¹¹ In these two writers can be seen the opposing ideas and wide range of

⁹Andrew Lang, "The Art of Mark Twain," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, pp. 282-83.

¹⁰"Roundabout Readings," Punch, 4 Jan. 1896, p. 5.

¹¹Charles Miner Thompson, "Mark Twain as Interpreter of American Character," in Mark Twain: Selected Criticism, ed. Arthur L. Scott (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), p. 58.

value placed on the character of Jim in the early criticism.

Little criticism was aimed at Huckleberry Finn in the early 1900's. In fact, I did not find the title in any bibliographies covering the years 1900-1910; but it is difficult to write about Mark Twain without, sooner or later, discussing Huckleberry Finn and, in that connection, Jim. William Phelps in 1907 discussed Twain's portrait of the pre-war South; he said that Twain shows "both points of view; he shows us the beautiful side of slavery--for it had a wonderfully beautiful, patriarchal side--and he shows us the horror of it.... The peculiar harmlessness of Jim is beautiful to contemplate."¹² Earlier Phelps had spoken of Jim's common sense versus Tom's romanticism in the final chapters of the novel. Obviously his impression of Jim is a stereotyped one of passivity and practicality.

With the death of Samuel Clemens in 1910 there was the expected flood of material written about him. An examination of this material shows that it deals mostly with Twain, the man, not with his individual works. Two biographers of Twain, William Dean Howells and Albert Bigelow Paine, published their works in 1910 and 1912 respectively. Howells does not mention

¹²William Lyon Phelps, "Mark Twain," in Mark Twain: Selected Criticism, ed. Arthur L. Scott (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), p. 86.

Jim, and Paine refers to him only while discussing the Concord Library's banning of Huckleberry Finn. Paine calls Jim "that lovely soul Nigger Jim."¹³ In the same year Archibald Henderson wrote:

Jim is a simple, harmless negro, childlike and primitive; yet, so marvellous, so restrained is the art of the narrator, that imperceptibly, unconsciously, one comes to feel not only a deep interest in, but a genuine respect for, this innocent fugitive from slavery.¹⁴

These observations were made more or less in passing, but it is interesting to watch these brief references and see how criticism develops and changes over the years as society changes.

The condescending attitude toward Negroes is still present in the only essay written in the 1920's that attempted to deal with Jim. John Erskine wrote an essay on Huckleberry Finn in 1927 in which he states: "The book owes more of its fame than we sometimes recognize to the portrait of the negro, Jim ... He is the one elaborate picture we have of the negro slave before the war."¹⁵ Erskine goes on to compare Mrs.

¹³Paine, p. 797.

¹⁴Archibald Henderson, Mark Twain (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1912), p. 185.

¹⁵John Erskine, "Huckleberry Finn," in The Delight of Great Books (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), p. 271.

Stowe's method of portraying slavery and slaves and Twain's.

Mark Twain...shows us the African in Jim, the ignorance which to the casual white seems absurd, but which really is connected with powers the white does not share. Altogether he is a wonderful creation.¹⁶

In his concluding remarks there is again the reference to being "childlike" that keeps turning up in the early material on Jim.

Huckleberry remains the hero of the story, but when we have laid the book down, the patient inscrutable black, with his warm heart and his child-like wisdom, remains not the least vivid of our memories.¹⁷

Van Wyck Brooks has the reputation for writing important critical works of Twain's generation; Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, and Samuel Clemens were prominent authors who became his subjects. In The Ordeal of Mark Twain, published in 1920, he refers to Huckleberry Finn numerous times; he discusses the writing of it, what its theme is, and what it tells us about Samuel Clemens; but Brooks never mentions Huck's Negro companion.

Although there was some criticism of Huckleberry Finn written in the 1930's, it pays little attention to Jim.

¹⁶Erskine, p. 272.

¹⁷Erskine, p. 273.

Bernard DeVoto in Mark Twain's America devotes the final pages to a discussion of this novel; yet Jim's name is mentioned only twice in passing. He uses no descriptive words in connection with Huck's Negro friend.

In the 1940's there began to appear criticism directed at the character of Jim and seeing Jim as more than just another Negro. DeVoto in 1942 writes:

Nigger Jim is, of course, the book's heroic character...Jim has all the virtues Mark admired. He is kind, staunch, and faithful, a brave man, a friend who risks his life and sacrifices his freedom for a friend. There is greatness in him.¹⁸

Roger Asselineau in his extensive chronological bibliography observed that Huckleberry Finn did not lend itself easily to "cinematographic treatment" in 1935, and one of the reasons he suggested was that it touched upon the controversial Negro problem.¹⁹ DeVoto is the first critic I found to speak openly of that injustice. He cites the famous raft scene after Huck and Jim were separated in the fog and Jim's answer: "Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed."

¹⁸DeVoto, p. 96.

¹⁹Roger Asselineau, The Literary Reputation of Mark Twain from 1910 to 1950 (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1954), p. 131.

This he calls a tremendous rebuke "from the humble to the human race whose cruelty was the strongest pressure in Mark's discontent."²⁰

It is refreshing to find a critic finally taking an honest and open look at this character. DeVoto recognizes in Jim a new portrait of the Negro as an individual, a human being. Until the creation of Jim, he calls sketches of Negroes "honest but pedestrian." Of Uncle Remus he says, "though he greatly tells the great fables of his race, [he] is himself false-face and crêpe-hair," and other Negroes, he says, were just "faithful slaves whose function in literature has been to croon in the honeysuckle while the Old South dies."²¹ Jim is recognized as important to the novel because he is a Negro who is human, he is not a stereotype, he is not a minstrel black-face, but it is through him that the reader sees the helpless tragedy of life.

The publication of introductions to Huckleberry Finn by Dixon Wecter and Lionel Trilling in 1948 opened new doors to the interpretation of Jim in literary criticism. Dixon Wecter made direct reference to one of the problems that would rouse the national consciousness and change American life in the following two decades. According to Wecter:

²⁰DeVoto, p. 96.

²¹DeVoto, p. 97.

Today, when a tardily awakened national conscience has begun to regard race prejudice as the chief blemish on the face of American democracy, readers of Huckleberry Finn are struck more forcibly than those of a generation ago by the fact that its real hero is Nigger Jim.²²

This openness and direct approach show the change that has occurred in the country's willingness to talk about the problem and give credit where it is due even though it will mean changing ideas held, even taught, for generations about Negroes, their "place" and abilities.

Lionel Trilling does not set out to write an in-depth interpretation of Jim; yet the remarks he makes stir ideas and begin a series of essays on Jim that make the next fifteen years of criticism in this area interesting and lively. Trilling points out that although Huck is what society would call a loner, he does like to be around people. Many times in the novel he speaks mournfully of being lonesome; and when he runs away from St. Petersburg he does not run to what Trilling calls "a completely individualistic liberty, for in Jim he finds his true father."²³ He does not develop this idea of Jim as a father figure or explain what he means by it except to compare the relationship to that of Stephen Dedalus and

²²Dixon Wecter, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York: Harpers, 1948), p. xxiii.

²³Lionel Trilling, "Huckleberry Finn," in The Liberal Imagination (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 108.

Leopold Bloom in Joyce's Ulysses.

Trilling goes on to say that "the boy and the Negro slave form a family, a primitive community--and it is a community of saints." He fails to recognize that there is no mother in this "family." Before one could develop the idea of these two as a family it would be necessary to come to a definition of what makes up a family. Trilling then points out how Jim contributes to Huck's moral testing and development.

Trilling's introduction to Huckleberry Finn was significant in the literary criticism involving Jim because it stimulated others to see Jim as seer, priest, comrade, and more, and to discuss the many ways in which Jim did or did not influence Huck, his actions, and internal conflicts.

In the decade of criticism under discussion, one final essay was published that cannot be ignored. Leslie Fiedler published an essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in which he discussed the literary diet offered by libraries to children. He stressed the number of "classics" such as the Leatherstocking Tales of Cooper, Dana's Two Years Before the Mast, Melville's Moby Dick and Twain's Huckleberry Finn which are stories of males living nomadic lives out of the society of women most of the time. He compares Huck and Jim to Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, and Ishmael and Queequeg. Fiedler says we should expect these books "shyly, guiltlessly as it were, to proffer a chaste male love as the ultimate emotional

experience--and this is spectacularly the case."²⁴ Where in the world's great novels we anticipate and find some heterosexual passion, we find instead in Huckleberry Finn a white boy and a Negro on a raft.

Though he calls these relationships "chaste," he points out that in Melville "the ambiguous relationship is most explicitly rendered; almost, indeed, openly explained." He proceeds to make a strong case for this statement in regard to Ishmael and Queequeg, but in the case of Huck and Jim his point is weak. He mentions Jim's dressing in a woman's gown which Fiedler admits could "mean something or nothing at all"; he fails to mention Huck's dressing up like a girl. Fiedler would like to read something into the "tenderness" of Huck's repeated loss and refinding of Jim. In contrast, a later critic complains of Huck's matter-of-fact, unemotional loss and refinding of Jim. Fiedler draws attention to other aspects of the relationship between Huck and Jim, such as the skinny-dipping and the sacrifice Jim makes in the final chapters of the book when he pretends not to know Huck. All of these things are innocent because the young reader expects them to be innocent and the adult reader wants them to be

²⁴Leslie A. Fiedler, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in An End to Innocence (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 144-45.

innocent, but one comes away from Fiedler wondering if there is, for Fiedler, such a thing as innocence any place in the world.

The amount of criticism dealing directly with Jim increased in the 1950's. This criticism, which contains some of the most searching interpretations to appear so far, varies widely in its approach to Jim. Some is directed at an analysis of his character, some deals with his place in the structure of the novel, and other essays deal with his relationship with Huck and Huck's development.

Gladys Bellamy points out that part of the power of the novel lies in Twain's portrayal of the character of Jim. She sees him as a "figure of dignity" from his first appearance silhouetted in the kitchen door. Although I doubt that all critics would agree that he is dignified at this point, there is agreement about Jim's later dignity. Both T. S. Eliot and Leo Marx support Bellamy here, and both point to the raft scene when Jim rebukes Huck for tricking a friend as evidence that Jim has developed a sense of self worth. Eliot writes, "I wish to elicit from it one meaning that is, I think, usually overlooked. What is obvious in it is the pathos and dignity of Jim."²⁵ Leo Marx points out that this incident helps Huck

²⁵T. S. Eliot, "An Introduction to Huckleberry Finn," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, p. 324.

to see that Jim is a proud and sensitive human being and not just someone's property. Never before has Huck considered that a slave might be worthy of respect. Jim shows Huck his error in this speech "full of simple dignity and a pathos that beautifully consists with its righteous indignation."²⁶ Dignity grows out of self-respect, and Jim's self-respect can develop when he is on the raft with Huck.

Jim is also characterized as being loyal, faithful, saintly, submissive, slow, purposeful, and manly by the critics of this period. No longer is he childlike and simple.

Superstition plays an important part in Jim's life as pointed out in earlier criticism. DeVoto in 1932 wrote, "that he [Huck] survived the menace of the unseen world was due wholly to Jim, a Negro, who was expert in manipulating it."²⁷ Huck is much impressed by Jim's ability to interpret nature's signs, and when the events Jim foretells come true the slave grows in stature in Huck's eyes. The black man becomes a teacher to the white boy.

Gladys Bellamy points out an interesting use of superstition when she sees it as part of Twain's satirizing of

²⁶Richard P. Adams, "The Unity and Coherence in Huckleberry Finn," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, p. 349.

²⁷Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 76.

institutions. Tom's ideas come from books, Jim's from "the dark knowledge that lies in his blood and his nerve ends."²⁸ Huck holds to no institutions. Tom can do little against the rules of his books, while Jim is bound to his voodoo and charms; but Huck, when away from the other two, can be guided by the voice within himself. Jim's belief in and knowledge of signs is significant, then, in developing in himself a feeling of importance, in providing Huck with alternate methods of making choices, and in developing Huck's character.

Frances V. Brownell's essay, "The Role of Jim in Huckleberry Finn," which was published in 1955, takes a far different view of Jim from that of Andrew Lang in 1891. Instead of listing him casually among the minor characters, Brownell calls Jim "one of the most important characters in the novel."²⁹ Jim's role in the novel is second only to Huck's, Brownell feels. His importance lies in his primary function which is to aid in the characterization of Huck. Jim is important to the action in only a very broad way; during parts of the story where most of the action occurs, Jim is a passive observer or is not even present.

²⁸Gladys Carmen Bellamy, Mark Twain as a Literary Artist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), pp. 339-40.

²⁹Frances V. Brownell, "The Role of Jim in Huckleberry Finn," Boston University Studies in English, 1 (1955), 74.

Huck's development is influenced by Jim's dignity. Brownell refers to the raft scene just as Eliot and Adams did. This episode causes Huck to struggle with and conquer his pride.

Brownell proposes that because Jim is a gentle and loyal person, because he is open and honest and has a deep capacity for love, because he fears and evades violence as so few of the characters do, Huck can respond in kind and finally declare, "All right, then, I'll go to hell," rather than turn Jim over to Miss Watson. Brownell feels that the special relationship between the boy and the runaway slave makes Huck's response to Jim possible. These two are comrades, companions.

Whereas Edgar Branch presents evidence that the Widow Douglas was significant in Huck's development, Brownell points out that there were too many barriers between those two. With Jim, there were no barriers of age, position, sex, or background. Jim and Huck were both runaways, attempting to escape from situations they could not control themselves. Neither had any social position and, for all practical purposes, no material possessions, but Brownell's inclusion of "age" in that list could be difficult to support. She may be assuming that because whites felt superior to Negroes the narrow age barrier between these two would disappear. Brownell goes on to discuss Trilling's suggestion that in Jim Huck found his true father and repeats in a footnote her own contention that

"Jim is able to be so important to Huck specifically because he is a comrade, not separated into the adult world proper, as a father substitute would be."³⁰

Brownell also speaks about the importance of Jim's superstition to the novel's plot. In some ways superstitious omens preceded the appearance of Pap on the scene, the wreck of the raft, the Grangerford episode, and the final rescue episode. Brownell sees these examples as evidence that superstition played a direct role in the plot; therefore, Jim was necessary to the plot. Branch had observed that Jim is Huck's mentor in the mysterious ways of nature and signs; Brownell agrees with this. She expands on Branch's remarks by showing that Jim did not just teach Huck the things to fear but taught him about things that brought good luck, too. Brownell calls Jim "the voice of love and conciliation in an erratically malicious and quarrelsome world."³¹ Huck and Jim just wanted to be left alone but were constantly being confronted by evil forces. Their struggle against these forces is often made more clear to the reader through the words and actions and personality of Jim.

Few critics can avoid some interpretation of the Phelps Farm episodes that close the book. Most critics agree that

³⁰Brownell, p. 80.

³¹Brownell, p. 80.

in the end both Huck and Jim shrink in stature because of their submission to Tom and his escapades; the real meaning of the novel lies between the two episodes which belong to him. Brownell does see a brief return to the tone of the major part of the novel when Jim tells Huck that Pap is dead.

Another critic, Kenneth Lynn, undertook a thorough examination of Jim in 1958 when he wrote, "Huck and Jim." In this essay and another, "You Can't Go Home Again," written in 1959, he developed in detail Trilling's proposal, rejected by Brownell, that Jim is Huck's true father. He points to the number of cases in Twain's writing where loneliness takes the form of alienation from the family. He contends that Huckleberry Finn is Twain's most exquisite expression of the tension resulting from a desire for freedom and a desire to belong which carries with it ties, imprisoning ties.

Lynn proposes that Huck was looking for a father and uses the Charles William Allbright episode from Life on the Mississippi to support his claim. He says that "in Twain the best jokes reveal the profoundest connections," and this is one of Twain's best jokes.³² This story is a parable of the search-for-a-father idea and includes a violent death and rebirth by water; all of which are at the heart of the novel. This search

³²Kenneth S. Lynn, "Huck and Jim," Yale Review, 47 (Spring, 1958), 426.

theme is introduced when Judge Thatcher and Widow Douglas go to court to take Huck away from Pap. Lynn says, "Huck listens for the voice of truth and the accents of love as a means of identifying the true parent he seeks."³³ He does not find what he is seeking in court, and so he flees to the river where he finds Jim. Although Huck is at first exasperated by the black man's ignorance, he is soon impressed because Jim is always right. Jim is fatherly to Huck in the sense that he corrects and admonishes him. He is always telling Huck some new truth about the world. Jim also displays his love by allowing Huck extra sleep, by calling him honey, petting him and doing "everything he could think of" for Huck. According to Lynn, Jim is showing concern for the integrity of his white child when he expresses horror at learning of Solomon's apparent willingness to split a child in two.³⁴ As the novel progresses Huck leaves the community on the raft and ventures into other society only to be sickened and to return to the fatherly bosom of Jim. In the end though, Lynn feels it is impossible for Huck to have both his freedom and his "father." Once Jim is free the two are forever separated.

Amidst all the praise being heaped on this novel and its characters, there are some dissident voices. William Van

³³Lynn, p. 428.

³⁴Lynn, pp. 228-29.

O'Connor wrote, in 1955, an essay, "Why Huckleberry Finn Is Not the Great American Novel," in which he calls the humor of "Was Solomon Wise?" a minstrel show and generally denies the characters have any claim to greatness."³⁵ Abigail Hamblin, writing in 1961, says that "if Uncle Tom is a stock symbol of an oppressed race, 'Nigger' Jim is the popular notion of the colored 'fall guy' of stage and fiction."³⁶ She says he displays quite "fathomless ignorance" enlivened by the most "grotesque superstition." She sees no humor in his innocent disregard for the truth or for his harmless guile as exemplified in the hairball incident. The relationship between the boy and the runaway slave is one of loyalty on Jim's part; he gives Huck all the affection "his simple being is capable of." Because of this loyalty and because Huck is amazed by Jim's knowledge of signs (a sign of Huck's gullibility, according to Hamblin) Huck develops a devotion to Jim.

In the decade of the 1960's, the critics say many of the same things about Jim as earlier ones, but they approach some old ideas with in-depth studies or give new slants to old ideas. Eric Solomon writes a variation of Lynn's search theme.

³⁵William Van O'Connor, "Why Huckleberry Finn Is Not the Great American Novel," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, p. 372.

³⁶Abigail A. Hamblin, "Uncle Tom and 'Nigger Jim'," Mark Twain Journal, 11 (Fall 1961), 15.

Whereas Lynn sees Huck in search of a father, Solomon believes he is searching for his identity through a satisfying family life. He feels Lynn is going too far when he nominates Jim as the father Huck is searching for. Huck, according to Solomon, was Jim's protector through the novel, and Huck has committed himself to humanity through the person of Jim.³⁷

Daniel G. Hoffman sees Jim "as seer and shaman, interpreter of the dark secrets of nature." Hoffman identifies three attitudes toward "the imaginative fulfillment of life," one of which is the world of supernatural omens which Jim understands best of the book's characters. By a close study of Jim's approach to this dark world one can see changes in Jim. He grows in maturity and takes on a man's obligations. He moves from being enslaved by his superstition, just as he is enslaved by society, to being a magician in communication with the spirits when his omens come true. As Jim's positive attitude about himself develops, his relationship with Huck develops. Finding Pap's body in the floating house frees Jim "to take the place that Pap was never worthy to hold as Huck's spiritual father."³⁸ Because of this new filial relationship

³⁷Eric Solomon, "The Search for Security," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, pp. 436-42.

³⁸Daniel G. Hoffman, "Black Magic--and White--in Huckleberry Finn," Norton, Huckleberry Finn, p. 402.

Huck cannot play tricks on Jim; Hoffman uses the snake-skin incident to support this idea. The scene following the separation in the fog reinforces that lesson: "Huck now realizes that he is bound to Jim by ties too strong for mischievous trifling."³⁹ In the final episode, Jim is spiritually free even though he is imprisoned while Silas' slave Nat has the run of the farm but is spiritually a slave. Jim's growth to becoming a man who accepts his responsibilities is exemplified both when he refuses to run and stays with the injured Tom and when he pretends not to know Huck.

In "The Character of Jim and the Ending of Huckleberry Finn," Chadwick Hansen maintains that the success or failure of the end of the novel is dependent on an understanding of the complex and original character of Jim. He first enters the novel as the comic stage Negro whom we are free to laugh at for that very reason. His ignorance is subhuman and he feels no mental pain. Later, in the hairball incident, we laugh not at Jim but at human ignorance and superstition. After Jim leaves St. Petersburg and we meet him on Jackson's Island he continues to develop as his common sense is recognized. The reader is shown his gentleness and his love for his family; and finally, in the episode after he is separated

³⁹Hoffman, p. 403.

from Huck by the fog, he is not the stage Negro at all, but man in the abstract.⁴⁰

Hansen proceeds to enumerate five types played by Jim in the novel; and yet, he says, Jim is not a fully-rounded character. He points out that it is not easy to create the fully-rounded fictional Negro. Too many prejudices and preconceived notions get in the way, and also the Negro has contributed to the difficulty by playing his assigned roles until he does not know his own identity.

The function of Jim in the novel is to "be the white man's burden." By this Hansen means that Jim is literally Huck's moral burden. He forces Huck to come to grips with the question of following society's laws or following the dictates of his own conscience. After Huck makes this decision, Jim's function in the novel is over, and Twain just needs to clear the stage as plausibly as possible.

The Jim of the final episode is not the Jim who was so carefully developed through most of the book. For the most part Hansen feels that the ending of the novel is a failure despite his and other critics' efforts to defend it.

In the literature of the 1970's there is one critic who proposes an interpretation of Jim that had not been dealt with

⁴⁰Hansen, pp. 45-51.

before. Orlan Sawey in his essay, "The Consistency of Nigger Jim in Huckleberry Finn," attempts to explain away what other critics have called inconsistencies in Jim's character. He says that Jim is not an inconsistently portrayed type but a real person reacting realistically to his varying environments. In developing his thesis this critic alone sees a particular problem in the character of Jim that I would like to look at closely and develop further.

II

All preceding critics cited seem to have failed to examine thoroughly the situation in which Huck and Jim find themselves. Both are runaways and are therefore dependent on each other. Their relationship was not only that of a father and son or that of a seer and his follower, nor were they just comrades. These and other interpretations of their relationship have been examined. Huckleberry Finn also gives the reader a picture of a relationship between a Black and a White in slavery times. I would like to examine closely the situation of each of these characters.

Huck was running from his drunkard father Pap and the good Widow Douglas. After Pap's "fall from grace" he went to court in an attempt to get Huck's money. While waiting for the court decision Pap made such a nuisance of himself at the widow's that she told him he must stay away or she would make trouble for him. Huck and Pap were not on the best of terms, but Huck was a source of money for Pap; so, in Huck's words, "he watched out for me one day in the spring, and caught me, and took me up the river about three mile, in a skiff, and crossed over to the Illinois shore where it was woody and there

warn't no houses."⁴¹ There, in a deserted log cabin, Huck was virtually a prisoner. Pap either stayed close to him or locked him in.

As time passed Huck came to enjoy the lazy life in the woods, but life with Pap was not usually pleasant. Huck was locked up and alone for long stretches of time while Pap went into town to buy supplies and get drunk. When Pap did return, drunk or sober, he would beat the boy. Finally, Huck could not take it anymore.

But by-and-by pap got too handy with his hick'ry, and I couldn't stand it. I was all over welts. He got to going away so much, too, and locking me in. Once he locked me in and was gone three days. It was dreadful lonesome. I judged he had got drowned and I wasn't ever going to get out any more. I was scared. (p. 47)

This is ample evidence that Huck was afraid of his father and wanted to escape from him, but Huck did not want to return to St. Petersburg either. Huck reports,

The widow she found out where I was, by-and-by, and she sent a man over to try to get hold of me, but pap drove him off with the gun, and it warn't long after that till I was used to being where I was, and liked it, all but the cowhide part. (p. 46)

⁴¹Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1962), p. 45. This is a facsimile of the first edition. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Later, Pap returned from a trip into town and told Huck that there would probably be another trial to take Huck from Pap and give him to the widow for his guardian, and this time the widow would win. Huck said, "This shook me up considerable, because I didn't want to go back to the widow's any more and be so cramped up and sivilized, as they called it" (p. 47).

In another description of his life with the Widow Douglas Huck said:

I didn't see how I'd ever got to like it so well at the widow's, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular, and be forever bothering over a book and have old Miss Watson pecking at you all the time. I didn't want to go back no more. (p. 46)

Huck feared for his life if he stayed with his father, and he feared for his way of life if he returned to the widow. Escape he must. He determined to get away by sawing a section out of the back of the cabin while Pap was away and covering it with a blanket when he heard Pap returning. He planned to "just tramp right across the country, mostly night times, and hunt and fish to keep alive, and so get so far away that the old man nor the widow couldn't ever find me any more" (p. 48).

Huck had the opening cut in the cabin wall and had decided the time had come to make his escape when one night in an attack of delirium tremens Pap attacked him with a knife.

Huck reports that the next day, "I got to thinking that if I could fix up some way to keep pap and the widow from trying to follow me, it would be a certainer thing than trusting to luck to get far enough off before they missed me" (p. 55). Later that day Pap again locked Huck in and headed for town. Huck had a plan by then; he made the cabin and the area around it look as if someone had come and killed him and thrown his body in the river.

The preceding materials are evidence that Huck wanted to get away from his father and the widow permanently and was willing to go to great lengths to do it.

Jim, too, was running away. Huck found Jim on Jackson's Island and asked him why he was there. He noticed that Jim "looked pretty uneasy, and didn't say nothing for a minute" (p. 68). Finally, after making Huck promise that he would not tell, Jim told him, "I--I run off" (p. 68). He then explained what caused him to run. Miss Watson had always said she would not sell him, but a slave trader showed up and, "She gwyne to sell me down to Orleans, but she didn' want to, but she could git eight hund'd dollars for me, en it 'uz sich a big stack o' money she couldn' resis'...I lit out mighty quick, I tell you" (p. 69).

Jim's situation was a serious one. Runaway slaves were such a problem in the South that a sympathetic government had enacted fugitive slave laws to help control them. This

required "all good citizens" to help law enforcement officers find and catch runaway slaves.⁴² Also, escape was the most serious offense against the Slave Codes. This Code made the slave "a prisoner for life on the plantation, except when his jailor pleases to let him out with a 'pass.'"⁴³ The penalties for being caught without such a pass were ten lashes for visiting a plantation without a pass, forty lashes for traveling at night without a pass, and twenty-five lashes for being on horseback without written permission.⁴⁴ Richard C. Wade records legislation prior to 1827 that made "liable every Negro seen out of his owner's lot to be taken up, nor can a servant be sent on the most trifling errand, without a ticket, or they are subject to be (and very often are) taken up by either the Patrol or others."⁴⁵

A witness to some of the cruel treatment of Negro slaves wrote the following incident in a letter:

A planter with whom I was well acquainted, had caught a negro without a pass. And at the moment I

⁴²C. Eric Lincoln, The Negro Pilgrimage in America (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 38.

⁴³Donald G. Mathews, ed., Agitation for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁴Mathews, p. 76.

⁴⁵Richard C. Wade, Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 81.

was passing by, he was in the act of fastening his feet and hands to the trees, having previously made him take off all his clothing except his trowsers. When he had sufficiently secured this poor creature, he beat him for several minutes with a green switch more than six feet long.⁴⁶

Jim, of course, knew all of this and had no pass to produce on demand.

There is evidence that Huck also knew that it was dangerous for Jim to be seen. As the fugitives floated down the Mississippi, Huck fretted considerably about helping a slave escape. When Jim began talking about hiring an Abolitionist to steal his children out of slavery, Huck could stand it no longer and decided to turn Jim in. Huck told Jim he was going to make certain the river town they were approaching was Cairo; then he shoved off in the canoe to turn Jim in.

But, as Orlan Sawey points out, Jim "has touched Huck's better self once; he can do it again. As Huck paddles away... Jim talks about his freedom and says Huck is responsible for it. 'Jim won't ever forget you, Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ol' Jim's got now.'"⁴⁷

This takes "the tuck" out of Huck and he hesitates. He was fifty yards or more from the raft, undecided as to what to

⁴⁶Mathews, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁷Orlan Sawey, "The Consistency of Nigger Jim in Huckleberry Finn," Texas A and I University Studies, 1 (Sept. 1971), 38.

do next when two slave hunters came along in a skiff. This was Huck's chance: he could tell them Jim was on the raft or he could just let them find Jim. Huck did neither of those things. Because he knew that even a glimpse of the black man on the raft would have brought questions and demands, Huck first lied. One of the men asked, "Is your man white or black?" and Huck answered, "He's white." Then, when the slave hunters started to go to see for themselves, Huck led them to believe there was smallpox on the raft. Huck recognized the danger and committed himself to Jim's freedom.

Jim is dependent on Huck for companionship, but also for his safety and any chance of freedom; he is very much aware of this dependence. Before he would even tell Huck he had run away he made Huck promise not to tell. "But you wouldn't tell on me ef I 'uz to tell you, would you, Huck?" (p. 68). And immediately after admitting what he had done, Jim reminded Huck of his promise--"But mind, you said you wouldn't tell--you know you said you wouldn't tell, Huck" (p. 69). It is to Jim's advantage to keep Huck with him and to strengthen this tie at every opportunity. Orlan Sawey was aware of this situation when he wrote: "When Huck first learns that Jim is a runaway, he is shocked. He has already promised, however, not to turn him in, and Jim is careful to see that the promise

is kept."⁴⁸ At the same time Huck, wishing to escape from his father, was, as we have seen, dependent upon Jim for comradeship and some guidance.

Under these circumstances Jim must have been quite shaken when he recognized Pap in the floating house. Jim became the leader in this instance. Before they entered they saw a body in the corner; Jim went to it immediately. What went through the runaway slave's mind when he recognized Pap Finn? Possibly, he thought, "If I tell Huck this is his father, then will he want to go back to St. Petersburg, to the Widow and the money?" Jim had little reason to believe Huck felt any loyalty toward him at this point, and even later he would not take a chance and tell him the identity of the body. As Sawey says, "Pap Finn [is] Huck's reason for running away. Huck's not knowing that Pap is dead is really Jim's insurance."⁴⁹ Dealing quickly with the question of what this situation meant to himself, Jim deliberately deceived Huck to his own advantage. He told Huck:

It's a dead man. Yes, indeedy; naked, too. He's ben shot in de back. I reckon he's ben dead two er three days. Come in, Huck, but doan' look at his face--it's too gashly. (p. 77)

⁴⁸Sawey, p. 37.

⁴⁹Sawey, p. 37.

Jim threw some rags over the body, possibly as a precaution in case Huck should become curious.

The next morning Huck expressed his feeling, "I wanted to talk about the dead man and guess out how he come to be killed, but Jim didn't want to... He said it would fetch bad luck" (p. 79). Jim had not reconsidered during the night. He would take no chances; he would not tell Huck his father was dead. After all, Jim had a lot at stake, and he was not hurting anyone with his deception.

Not until the end of the adventure did Jim reveal the truth about the body in the floating house. Twain does not record the scene when Jim learns he is free. Tom informed Aunt Sally on pages 360 and 361 that Miss Watson had died and set Jim free in her will. Soon after, on page 364, Jim knew that he was free: "We had Jim out of the chains in no time." The boys joined him to talk about their adventures and plans, but Huck had no money with which to buy an outfit and said he could not go back to St. Petersburg and get money "because it's likely pap's been back before now, and got it all away from Judge Thatcher and drunk it up" (p. 365).

At this point Jim told Huck that Pap is dead.

Jim says, kind of solemn:

"He ain't a comin' back no mo', Huck."

I says:

"Why, Jim?"

"Nemmine why, Huck--but he ain't comin' back no mo'."

But I kept at him; so as last he says:

"Doan' you 'member de house dat was float'n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah, kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn' let you come in? Well, den, you k'n get yo' money when you wants it; kase dat wuz him." (p. 366)

Jim had nothing to lose now; he no longer needed Huck and could tell him the truth.

Sawey sees that Jim was a role-acting Black, a far more complicated creation than most critics have recognized. Jim is the superstitious slave in the novel's first chapters but changes, or reveals himself more, as his relationship to Huck develops. He fades into the background when the Duke and Dauphin appear on the scene and reverts to the role of slave again when Tom is in control of the action. He maintains this role as long as the situation calls for it. His actions and attitude change only when Tom is hurt and Jim takes responsibility for caring for him. Jim did as Tom told him until they had escaped and realized Tom had been shot. One moment Jim was complimenting his white masters on the execution of their scheme. He said, "It 'uz planned beautiful, en it 'uz done beautiful; en dey ain't nobody kin git up a plan dat's mo' mixed-up en splendid den what dat one wuz" (p. 344). But soon he and Huck consulted on what to do for the wounded Tom, and the noble Jim appeared again. He took the responsibility for caring for Tom even if it meant giving up his chances of escaping to freedom. He told the boys, "I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a doctor; not if it's forty year!"

(p. 345). This noble side of his character was also shown when he was captured and did not "let on" that he knew Huck.

As the captured runaway slave, Jim was again meek and submissive. This attitude did not change until he learned that he was free; then, as Huck's old friend, he told Huck that Pap was dead.

The fact that Jim told Huck the truth about his father only after he knew he was free means that Jim had been using Huck all along. Jim is not a portrait of a stereotyped Negro, nor is he just a superstitious slave or a kindly father, teacher or comrade as critics have interpreted him; he is a complicated creation capable of plotting and deception. This does not mean that he is not devoted to Huck--many of us are devoted to people, genuinely love them, and use them, too. Indeed, it is perhaps easier to use those we love; they are less likely to question us. This was shown in the case of Huck and Jim when Huck brought up the subject of the body in the floating house. Huck took at face value Jim's explanation of why they should not discuss it; Huck did not bring up the subject again.

Sawey paid Mark Twain the supreme compliment--he wrote about Jim as though he were a real person. He said, "Jim is shown...as a real person reacting realistically to his varying

environments."⁵⁰ One would agree that Jim is reacting as a real Black person would. It seems that Sawey does not give Twain enough credit for creating this character. Although he wrote: "It is incomprehensible that the Mark Twain who wrote Pudd'nhead Wilson could have been unaware of the problems of the Southern Negro when he wrote Huckleberry Finn,"⁵¹ he apparently does not see that recognizing a situation and getting inside its participants are two different accomplishments. Yet, if the above interpretation is correct, Mark Twain was able to do just that and was therefore even more skilled as an artist than had been thought.

Of Mark Twain's ability to create characters, Gladys Bellamy wrote: "The art of characterization is the one most important to a novelist, and Mark Twain's characters are his greatest literary achievement."⁵² She cites a passage Twain wrote in 1907 in which he said: "Every man is in his own person the whole human race, with not a detail lacking. I am the whole human race without a detail lacking; I have studied the human race with diligence and strong interest all these years in my own person."⁵³ She recognized that Twain would

⁵⁰Sawey, p. 41.

⁵¹Sawey, p. 36.

⁵²Bellamy, p. 338.

⁵³Bellamy, p. 338.

search inside himself for a certain trait and then develop it to suit the character he wanted, but she failed to recognize the greatness of the accomplishment of a white man, especially in the 19th century, understanding what went on inside a slave. He was capable of showing his reader many sides of the too often stereotyped Negro character in literature. His Jim was the fugitive Black, the superstitious Black, the terror-stricken fugitive Black, the noble Black; he was also the quick-thinking, quick-acting, wily, manipulating Black, who used Huck for his own purposes while he loved and cared for him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asselineau, Roger. The Literary Reputation of Mark Twain from 1910 to 1950: A Critical Essay and a Bibliography.
Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1954.
- Bellamy, Gladys Carmen. Mark Twain as a Literary Artist.
Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1950.
- Bradley, Sculley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long,
eds. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Annotated Text,
Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism. By
Samuel Langhorne Clemens. New York: Norton, 1962.
- Branch, Edgar Marquess. The Literary Apprenticeship of Mark
Twain. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1950.
- Bridges, Robert. "Review of Huckleberry Finn." Life. 26
Feb. 1885, p. 19.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. The Ordeal of Mark Twain. New York: E. P.
Dutton, 1920.
- Brownell, Frances V. "The Role of Jim in Huckleberry Finn."
Boston University Studies in English, 1 (1955), 74-83.
- Clemens, Samuel Langhorne. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
Introd. Hamlin Hill. San Francisco: Chandler, 1962.
- DeVoto, Bernard. Mark Twain at Work. Cambridge: Harvard
Univ. Press, 1942.

----- . Mark Twain's America. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.

Erskine, John. The Delight of Great Books. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928.

Fiedler, Leslie A. "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" In An End to Innocence. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

Hamblin, Abigail A. "Uncle Tom and 'Nigger Jim'." Mark Twain Journal, 11 (1961), 13-17.

Hansen, Chadwick. "The Character of Jim and the Ending of Huckleberry Finn." Massachusetts Review, 5 (1963), 45-66.

Henderson, Archibald. Mark Twain. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912.

Lincoln, C. Eric. The Negro Pilgrimage in America. New York: Bantam, 1967.

Lynn, Kenneth S. "Huck and Jim." Yale Review, 47 (1958), 421-31.

McIntyre, James P. "Three Practical Jokes: A Key to Huck's Changing Attitude Toward Jim." Modern Fiction Studies, 14 (1968), 33-37.

Mathews, Donald G., ed. Agitation for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972.

Paine, Albert Bigelow. Mark Twain: A Biography. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912. Vol. II.

Perry, Thomas Sergeant. "Mark Twain." Century Magazine, May 1885, pp. 171-72.

- Phelps, William Lyon. "Mark Twain." In Mark Twain: Selected Criticism. Ed. Arthur L. Scott. Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1955.
- "Roundabout Readings." Punch. 4 Jan. 1896, pp. 4-5.
- Sawey, Orlan. "The Consistency of Nigger Jim in Huckleberry Finn." Texas A and I University Studies, 1 (1971), 35-41.
- Thompson, Charles Miner. "Mark Twain as Interpreter of American Character." In Mark Twain: Selected Criticism. Ed. Arthur L. Scott. Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1955.
- Trilling, Lionel. The Liberal Imagination. London: Secker and Warburg, 1955.
- Vogelback, Arthur Lawrence. "The Publication and Reception of Huckleberry Finn in America." American Literature, 11 (1939), 260-72.
- Wade, Richard C. Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Wecter, Dixon, introd. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. By Samuel Langhorne Clemens. New York: Harpers, 1948.